

FIN DE SIÈCLE, END OF THE “GLOBE STYLE”?

THE CONCEPT OF OBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY ART *

- “Fin de siècle”, murmured Lord Henry.
 - “Fin du globe”, answered his hostess.
- O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Using this bit of dialogue from Oscar Wilde as introduction, we propose to demonstrate the pertinence of the hostess’ remark and to show that the “*Fin de siècle*” really did mark a certain “*Fin du globe*”, connoting as it does the decline of art, the end of an era and of the eras in which artistic experience, and even experience of the world, was realized in a specific style. It was indeed the end of what we will here call “globe style”.

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

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STYLE

For a long time the notion of style had a very general significance. The origin of the word can no doubt be traced back to the term *stilus*, designating the punch that monks used for writing, and also probably an Egyptian etymon signifying a pillar.¹ Through metonymic extensions the name of the instrument (an instrument, nevertheless, used in a highly intellectual activity) and the name of the individual work (but a work of cultural and artistic nature) have been subject to generalization and ultimately designate the specific quality of a phenomenon. Obviously it was necessary that this phenomenon be confirmed and made official through imitation and tradition. As for generalization of the phenomenon of style, its scope has become almost unlimited, taking in all forms of creative activity whether artistic or not, and ultimately almost all beings as long as they have assumed a form hallowed by tradition.

Nevertheless, some important exceptions anticipate the cardinal conflict that was to become evident in the course of the development of historical styles. A purely ideal substance—God, for example—has no more style than a celestial constellation, being unique, unchanging and incomparable. A nail, a totally functional object created by pure *techne*, would likewise be excluded from the universe stamped with the quality of style.

It is also quite significant that Plato and Hegel, the philosophers who integrated art most completely into a global and transcendent conceptual scheme (who, in other words, subjected art to this scheme), both conceived their paradigmatic art in extrastylistic domains. For Plato it was Egyptian art; despite his theoretical austerity with regard to the kind of pretense that art is, he made an exception for it in the *Laws*, precisely because this art made it a point not to recognize styles and tended to realize its achievements according to a series of technical regulations, each of which produced creations in conformity with a specific major canon.²

¹ Cf. George Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, New Haven and London, 1962; see also the word “stylite”.

² Plato, *Laws*, 2/657-7 and 7/799 a-b. For the term style and canon in Egyptian art see Jan Assmann, “Viel Stil am Nil”, in Gumbrecht/Pfeiffer (eds.), *Stil*, Frankfurt, 1986, pp. 519-537.

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Hegel, in turn, did away with style by recognizing the pure idea, as if it were possible, even theoretically, to conceive of an ideal classicism, namely a work of art that is only an ideal substance. “The only grand manner has always been not to have one.”³

HISTORIC STYLE

Hegel’s words are arguable, particularly for the period in which he wrote them. Indeed art had already begun its transition toward historic style, and it was difficult to apply these words to the period in which this art was being created and conceived, and when it considered itself to be both a historical and autonomous phenomenon. The first tendencies in this direction arose in the Renaissance period and succeeded one another in a certain spatial-temporal proximity.⁴ Later the theories of the Enlightenment and the Romantic works of Iena systematically redetermined the general significance of style.⁵

Style was then no longer the specific characteristic that a phenomenon might acquire or even surpass; style was the form of the creation and of the objective reality of the work, and it is precisely this form that the expression “historic style” designates.

This substantial change, brought about by a new general conception of the place and role of art, was also closely related to the collapse of theological systems in the Enlightenment period. The origin of historic style can be traced back to the attempt by the Enlightenment to substitute the historic form of artistic creation for the then-contested eternal transcendence of religion. The most exalting version at that time of this global endeavor was the utopian yearning for an “aesthetic world, for the most per-

³ Hegel, “Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik”, in *Werke*, vol. 13, p. 385 (“Keine Manier zu haben war von jeher die einzig grosse Manier...”).

⁴ Vasari is in fact the first to describe an artistic evolution in stylistic categories and to demonstrate a theoretical interest in the problem.

⁵ The following pages are greatly indebted to the concepts and analyses of Jürgen Habermas, particularly in his book, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt, 1985.

fect of all works of art: the construction of true political liberty”, advocated, in the pathetic tones to which Enlightenment dialectics⁶ have accustomed us, by Schiller.⁷ On the other hand, however, if we recall the officially-sanctioned experiments to which this gave birth—which could go as far as the perverse aestheticism of debacle in the case of the Third Reich, for example—this is also perhaps its most dangerous manifestation. But at the time control exercised by philosophical thinking was widespread; this was the source of the new concept of historic style, contributing also to its development.

In this new conception art took on functions that until then had traditionally been reserved for metaphysical objectivations and for diverse forms of mystic thinking such as religion, becoming an objectivation of theocracy and of the State itself. In the dialectic of this capital moment, art recognized that its very existence, like other manifestations of human society, is determined by history.

This form, this creation of ambiguous existence, absolute inasmuch as it is a total system of transcendence (a quasi-religion, a private myth), relative for it necessarily changes with time where it has meaning only in relation to another temporal form of existence, in relation to a style that is theoretically its equivalent: this is historic style.

It can be said broadly that between the Enlightenment and the explosion that radically ended the *fin-de-siècle* period, artistic creation was realized in a series of historical styles, partly consecutive, partly simultaneous, and that artistic reflection (criticism) interpreted and systematized its object in the same categories. Artistic conception led to a total or, pejoratively, totalitarian conception that had no objection in principle to an extension of the validity of historical styles to each domain and to each phenomenon of human space and time. The integral description of an era depends just as much on the category of the historic style as, shall

⁶ Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Frankfurt, 1971.

⁷ Schiller, “Über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen”, in *Werke*, vol. 4, p. 194 (“mit dem vollkommensten aller Kunstwerke, mit dem Bau einer wahren politischen Freiheit zu beschäftigen”).

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we say, the description of a career, of an individual face, of a national trait or of an object in everyday use. Spengler did not hesitate to attribute the same stylistic value that marks different cultures to “their” mathematics. “There is no mathematic, there are only mathematics”, he declared.⁸ And in Kandinsky’s view mathematics played, must play, the opposite role. “What remains as the final abstract expression in every art is the number”, he stated.⁹

It is necessary to recognize in this preponderant role of historic style an attempt to resolve in art and through art a series of conflicts that surpass it. Historic style is a particular form of creation and existence in which art assumes the mission of ancient transcendent systems—divine, natural and absolute—by making of them its own categories. Each of the systems in the series of historic styles was devoted to creating and establishing a harmony, a *Stimmung*, a synthesis of the external and internal world, of absolute and relative time, of art and nature, of beauty and truth, of *poiesis* and of *techne*, concentrating them in a single pair of opposites: a synthesis of idea and matter. The inverse constellation is no less true. The loss of confidence in any value whatever that nature or matter should produce, has introduced a fundamental doubt as to the objective and the possibility of this specific synthesis, and it has literally broken the series of successive or alternative, imaginative or reflexive constructions. After World War I, art and criticism were separated from a common and radical movement of the ideal of historic style; they eliminated its postulates and its objective in order to be conceived and to conceive of themselves as the negation of historic style.

FIN-DE-SIÈCLE ART

It is at the turning point between the past century and this one that the mission and nature of historic style were most evident.

⁸ Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, Munich, 1973 (1923), p. 82 (“Es gibt keine Mathematik, es gibt nur Mathematiker”).

⁹ Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Berne, 1952 (1912), p. 130 (“Als letzter abstracter Ausdruck bleibt in jeder Kunst die Zahl”).

This was the period of style *par excellence*. The attempt, and even the nostalgic desire, to integrate facts and values that were extra-artistic to the highest degree into a form of aesthetic existence dominated art as well as life to the extent that this endeavor was successful. (The famous letter in which Freud states that Schnitzler is his closest companion says a great deal about the aesthetic procedure and produces as much admiration as doubt with regard to its extensive effect.) In the artistic domain as such, this was also the period of theories seeking to attribute an unbounded value to historic style. These theories were inspired, more strongly than their elitist universalism might suggest, by the art contemporary with them, flamboyant *fin-de-siècle* art, and even more they can be read as a description and justification of this same art. This consonance was as total as it was singular. *Fin-de-siècle* art, the “globe style”, was a sentimental and hypertrophic form, and the determining features of this form of creation and existence referred in fact to extra-artistic motifs, or even to a design of philosophical intention.

In each of its versions, that called vitalist and that termed decadent, *fin-de-siècle* art took up the immense challenge thrown down by industrial society, the new multitude of objects, the new rhythm of life, the genesis of a “second nature” (Marx). The precursor movement contained this aspect in its title: “Arts and Crafts”, whose often-stated inspiration and objective it was to create an artistic, and by the force of things (it is tempting to speak of the force of “objects”) increasingly artificial, control over the dramatic change that had occurred in the nature of society.

This ambiguous attempt to perceive but also to completely absorb the new reality pushed art to an extreme aestheticization of the world; indeed, for lack of being able to master each material in depth, for lack of being able to re-create its structure, it impregnated the world with an idea of aesthetic nature.

No living being, no object nor entity was excepted; not cities, which Verhaeren saw as “tentacular”,¹⁰ nor a natural flower cultivated to give the impression of an artificial flower as Huysmans desired. The fate of a hero and the rhythm of a single phrase

¹⁰ Allusion to the volume of poetry by Verhaeren, *Les villes tentaculaires*, 1895.

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of his story, the pen and the writing that related it, the fate of the author and of the reader in a common world, their furniture, train stations, museums and factories: everything bore the same imprint of the historic style—or at least of a nostalgia for it. Many years later Walter Benjamin used the term *aura* to designate his impressions as a “stroller” among the objects, the “*tableaux parisiens*”, of the Third Republic.¹¹ The same effect is evoked by Spitzer’s term *Stimmung*:¹² the object is presented in an atmospheric state, under a form of existence that is transcendent relative to its initial purpose, and it is so presented in order to realize *in extremis* a synthesis between an idea, metaphysical mission that since Schiller could only be artistic, and the increasingly brutal presence, the ever more functional purpose of matter.

This extremely particular ensemble seemed repugnant, according to Loos or Broch, in the eyes of the new generation; this “globe style”, created by the realization and the immediate representation of the fundamental synthesis, this perfect artifact. *Fin-de-siècle* globe style is heterogeneous, spatial, synchronic, ornamental and, despite its inner agitation, entirely stagnant as state and as integral image. To grasp and attempt to master the immense diversity of facts and qualities in representation, art placed them in a continuous assembly where time, the irreversible principle of change, unknown and rejected, does not exist, where arabesques and ornamental decorations link such facts and such objects to one another. The tremendous difference between living beings and inanimate objects and decorations disappears, each being the incarnation and the allegory of the same style, of this *Stimmung*, of this creation of harmony within spatial existence, heavenly like a carpet or the languorous body of a fragile woman. Gaudi’s apparently arbitrary façades that impose their octopus-like structure on the internal space of the house as well as on the external space of the city, or the monument by Behrens, the façade of

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, die Hauptstadt des XX. Jahrhunderts”, and also “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire”, in W. Benjamin, *Illuminationen*, Frankfurt, 1980, pp. 170-230.

¹² Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian “Ideas” of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word “Stimmung”*, (ed.) Anna Gabrielle Hatcher, Baltimore, 1986.

a non-existent building, located at the summit of what was the hill of artists and should have been an exemplary space for future generations (*Mathildenhöhe*): all of these constructions at the boundary between architecture and decoration refer to some paradigmatic value. It was necessary for *fin-de-siècle* globe style to become a life-size stage, as big as the universe, an immense but strictly closed space, in order to realize and consume in great consonance and correspondence beings transcended in arts and in art, a difficult and ultimate unity of the (artistic) idea and of (natural) matter.¹³

IDEA AND MATTER: THEORETICAL REFLECTION

Such is the almost philosophical design of this *fin-de-siècle* style. It seems that the primary conflict this formal creation continuously thematizes—the tension between idea and matter, and its ultimate ideal, style as principle of synthesis—engulfed the central problem and the abstract solution of the theory of historic style. Theoretical reflection, the construction of the evolution of art in historic styles, is part of the history of *fin-de-siècle* ideas. This construction is directly inspired by the contemporary art that it described and justified; *fin-de-siècle* art is the secret but paradigmatic model for the theory. The relationship between authentic theoretical reflection and the quasi-philosophy of a hypertrophied sentimental form is certainly unique and perhaps even degrading (the great thinkers passed over it in silence), but it is all the more significant for this.

The different theories, so often contradictory, and historic styles have this much in common. They were all conceived as a reflection on the central conflict of the new state and the new function of art after the Enlightenment. Three principal stages followed one another: forms of the view of the world with Wölfflin, artistic desire in Riegl, and the table of relationships of the arts in Walzel.

¹³ In my book *Das Bild in der Lyrik des Jugendstils*, Frankfurt, 1983, I attempted to explain and interpret this artistic picture more fully, and at the same time the picture of *fin-de-siècle* existence. See especially pp. 96-119.

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Wölfflin located the *raison d’être* and the reason for the evolution of art, become its own transcendence as well as that of the world, in the categories of artistic vision. The different systems of these categories reconstructed the various eras in their conceptual integrality, down to their most abstract spiritual values. Wölfflin posited a strong unity between *poiesis* and *techne*; and despite his exceptional sensitivity as historian and exegete, he proposed the hypothesis of an eternal and suprahistorical alternation between two constant systems—the gothic and the baroque—in the universal evolution of art and of the world.

Although the abundantly commented upon concept of “artistic desire” (*Kunstwollen*) remains enigmatic, it is precisely because Riegl recognized the enigmatic nature of this unity. No assembly, no system of visual categories could open up on an historic view of the world. The ultimate unity between the era and its art exists, but it remains, in the strict sense of the term, inconceivable, and Riegl’s theory brings into relief the tension inherent in this cohesion. Riegl distinguishes an ideal principle, autonomous, supra-individual, sometimes even supranational, that determines the historic existence of art; it is in this perspective that he interprets the works, the objects and their era. Without avoiding a reductionism that presents them as sequences of forms, Riegl makes no substantial difference between a Flemish portrait and heraldic art or tapestries. In any case his clear preferences for crafts and decorative arts show that the historic questions of this abstract theory are not independent of the art of that period.

However, this relationship becomes fully clear in the solution that Walzel proposed. It bears witness to the basic interrelationship between the arts (*Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste*) and also to theories within an era. The theory, or rather the table of relationships in arts, affected in the aesthetic realm the hypothesis in which Dilthey attempted to resolve conflicts originating in a “spiritual construction of the world” (*der geistige Aufbau der Welt*), namely the hypothesis of the existence of spiritual (i.e. not material) facts: linguistic, religious, artistic, etc. These facts are ordered according to a significant convergence for such or such historical period; each of the totalities that construct the period—and that are constructed in the period—exists with the ambiguity of an absolute value and historical relativity, the final totality

being the period itself. By examining what he calls “the relationship between Dilthey and Wölfflin”, Walzel is able to assume the principal function of the historic style. The synthesis is spectacular, but also ill-considered, inevitably linked to his own era, as his philosophical references prove. And it is paradoxically its universality that seems most “*fin de siècle*”. The relationship between the arts is established less by the theater of the Renaissance and the Elizabethan period to which it refers than by the flourishing of contemporary arts: the *fin-de-siècle scaena mundi*, globe style, universe of style, where objects, beings and even the most heterogeneous arts strictly speaking are stripped of their particularity and of their substance to become integrated into the supreme transcendence of style that incarnates and realizes historical-aesthetic totality: unity of the idea and of matter.¹⁴

POIESIS OR TECHNE: THE SCHISM

Such a construction, such a synthesis, marked in its problematic and in its categories by a certain constellation of European thought, and especially in its solution by a very particular ideal of the same constellation, could not last long. Its collapse was as universal as its ambitions. As with a final possible relationship, that of the suppression and the negation of presuppositions and objectives of the conceptual system, art and the theoretical reflection on art together turned away from the construction of style. Just as in the genesis of historic style, this opposite development, the recognition of the impossibility of any unity between *poiesis* and *techne*, idea and matter, and what is even more radical, the admission of the fundamental futility of this ideal, is also part of a general constellation in European thinking. Let us note, in a sort of annotated palimpsest, the most significant works and opinions.

¹⁴ Note that the principal texts in this discussion, today little known, will appear in a large anthology: Peter Por, Sandor Radnoti (eds.), *Stilepoche: Theorie und Diskussion. Eine interdisziplinäre Anthologie von Winckelmann bis heute*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang Verlag, 1989.

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AN UNHEEDED PRECURSOR: DIDEROT

First let us recall a passage in a text dating from 1767, a dialogue in which Diderot and a priest draw the ultimate conclusions of a fictive experience.

- Abbé, to the point. If I had here a bushel of dice, and if I turned the bushel over and all the dice landed on the same point, would this surprise you very much?
- Very much.
- And if all the dice were loaded, would it still surprise you?
- No.
- Abbé, to the point. The world is nothing but a mass of molecules loaded in an infinite number of different manners. There is a law of necessity that is executed without design, without effort, without intelligence, without progress, without resistance in all the works of Nature. If someone invented a machine that produced paintings like those of Raphael, would these paintings still be beautiful?
- No.
- And the machine? When it became common, it would be no more beautiful than the paintings?
- But according to your principles, is not Raphael himself this painting machine?
- True. But Raphael the machine was never common; and the works of this machine are not as common as leaves of the oak tree. But by a natural and almost invincible tendency we presume that this machine has a will, intelligence, a design, liberty. Suppose that Raphael was eternal, immobile before the canvas, painting necessarily and unceasingly. Multiply these imitative machines everywhere. Make paintings be born in nature like the plants, trees and fruits that serve as their models, and then tell me what would become of your admiration.¹⁵

At the time no one paid any attention to this passage and, what is more amazing, it continues to be unnoticed.¹⁶ Nevertheless, from the point of view of the evolution of art, this passage, or rather this warning, seems extremely important. At the moment

¹⁵ Diderot, "Salon de 1767", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, 1876, tome XI, p. 103.

¹⁶ A recent very important article is the exception: Ursula Link-Heer, "Maniera Überlegungen zur Konkurrenz von Manier und Stil", in Gumbrecht/Pfeiffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-114.

of the genesis of historic style, Diderot conceived the impossibility of its underlying assumptions, the substantial incompatibility of *poiesis* and *techne* that historic style had as mission and objective to dissolve into the unity of *Stimmung*. His warning is even more precise, even more fateful in that he defines the schism in the creation of form that was to occur one hundred and fifty years later and describes the two types of works in which art continued to create when the end of art, and the end of the universe of historic style as well, became evident.

PANOFSKY: "IDEA"; LUKÁCS: "ATTRIBUTED CONSCIOUSNESS"

In the realm of theoretic reflection a seemingly purely philological and erudite treatise announced this turning point. In 1924 appeared the book *Idea* by Panofsky, young follower and contradictor of Wölfflin and Riegl. In his book Panofsky surveys the various stages in the itinerary of the idea, the *eidōs*, between Plato and classicism. By pointing out at each of these stages his perpetual conflict with matter, Panofsky determines the relationship of the idea with matter as being insoluble by definition, and certainly with a programmatic intention, he eliminates the basis and objective of the theory of historic style.¹⁷

To designate, in a necessarily abrupt manner, the general constellation in which this change in artistic reflection appeared, let us evoke the more daring terms of a work that appeared one year earlier and that caused a veritable furor among the intelligentsia of the left at that time and once again in 1968. In his *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács, devoting several pages to an explicit refutation of Schiller's solution through the aesthetic principle, established the concept—as ingenious as it was dangerous—of "attributed consciousness" (*Zugeordnetes Bewusstsein*). In modern capitalist society, where nature has lost all its value as principle because it no longer determines the structure of classes, the true consciousness of the proletariat (still the prophet-class by virtue of its pure and simple existence in Marx) can in no way

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Idea*, Hamburg, 1924.

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be identified with its real psychological consciousness. True consciousness, which corresponds to the social situation, must therefore be attributed to it. And this “attributed consciousness” will enable it to conceive the totality of the social process.¹⁸

This term employed by Lukács designated the extreme point of view of the same development in European thinking and history after 1914, and especially after 1917. It was a development that Panofsky recognized and conceptualized for the realm of aesthetic reflection. And it seems that the evolution of art was also marked by this same development; its categories, apparently purely theoretical, or even extra-artistic, determine precisely the new principle of artistic creation beyond globe style, and beyond historic style in general.

BEYOND HISTORIC STYLE

The mission of historic style was to construct a series of units, of particular syntheses between idea and matter, art and nature. To the contrary, the Lukács concept removes all value from nature (from the environment as well as from history); it codifies the schism between values and deeds, according the power and the principle of construction exclusively to the idea. And it does this in synchrony with the work in which Panofsky demonstrated the conflictual essence of what should have become a harmony of style. The major turning point in art, the pivotal works created in the five brilliant years of European art were: *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust, *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot, *Ulysses* by Joyce, the first twelve-tone piece by Schönberg (*Opus 22*), *Der Zauberberg* by Thomas Mann (the chronicle of a Manichean combat in which the spirits of Evil and Good engage in a hermetically closed place in order to capture the soul or consciousness of a young man), *Duineser Elegien* by Rilke, *Charmes* by Valéry, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* by Gide, the first *Lehr-*

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, Berlin, 1923. Lukács presented his idea in the article “Klassenbewusstsein”, published for the first time in 1920 and revised for the book.

stücke by Brecht, and also the first fiercely anti-impressionist *Manifesto of Surrealism*, the various *Angels* by Klee (a perspective so spiritual that it becomes angelic, a perspective of the world, of place and of the becoming of this angel itself).¹⁹ All these works were conceived by consciousness, even by “attributed consciousness”, as the unique principle of creation and of construction of form, and they visibly display their consciousness, their *eidos* that is their sole trait in common. This common trait is, however, primordial: renunciation of “style” that is—in Valéry’s words—“the devil”, renunciation of all aesthetics, tends to reproduce, to imitate or to transform historical-natural principles in the creation of form and, *ex positivo*, affirmation of consciousness, of thought, of the *eidos*, precisely in those functions that style should have fulfilled. Consciousness—“attributed”—assumes this function, down to its universal extremity: in the vision and prophecy of Kandinsky, “the spiritual turning point” (*geistige Wendung*) in art, “the conception of the work according to the laws of inner necessity” merely announces “the great Spiritual era” (*Epoche des grossen Geistigen*).²⁰

RAPHAEL-PAINTER AND RAPHAEL-MACHINE

Two complementary forms of art appear beyond historic style. Each of them is a form conceived with a paradigmatic intention, to such an extent that they conform to the two models Diderot had defined at the genesis of the phenomenon, the complementary dichotomy between Raphael the painter and Raphael the machine.

The poetic art, as art of *poiesis*, of ideas, mental in the first degree (with its many famous works) could be understood in

¹⁹ See Will Grohmann, *Klee*, Zurich, 1952, p. 312. “Der ‘Engel im Werden’ (1934) ist kein Engel, sondern eine Genesis, vielleicht auch, wie Klee vor dem Bild erklärte, der Ort der Entstehung”. This definition is certainly just as true for the preceding “Angels”, especially in light of Klee’s continuous meditations on the problem of perspective. Let us recall once again the special significance that these “Angels” had for Walter Benjamin throughout his life.

²⁰ Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige*, p. 36 (“*Geistige Wendung*”); p. 85 (“*Gesetze der inneren Notwendigkeit*”); p. 143 (“*Epoche des grossen Geistigen*”).

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Schönberg’s apodictic declaration. “In its broadest sense, the concept of thought is applied as synonymous with theme, melody, phrase or motif. I consider the totality of a piece as a thought (*Gedanke*): the thought the author wished to represent”.²¹ Architecture has always been the representative art of the historic style, in its grandeur as well as in its misery.²² It is a highly formalized art, but one that is not independent of nature, neither in its ideal design nor in its material incarnation. On the other hand, the art representative of the surpassing of style toward the Spiritual, the temporal art *par excellence*, is music, such as the intellectual brothers Kandinsky and Schönberg conceived it: an absolute art because of its proximity to mathematics, independent of the principles and laws of nature. Autonomous conception and the creation of a new serial relationship between absolute sound values is realized immediately and entirely in the musical work of art. It is in the sense of this absolute control of “thought” over matter that the musical work is representative—representative of painting that attempts to establish itself in the visual relationship between absolute declared values and values “attributed” to the point, the line, colors, elementary forms;²³ representative also of literature of the novel that is created in a hermetic formula based on the ultimate unity of Good and Evil, of Health and Sickness, of the Flesh and the Soul. Indeed, the inspiration for *Der Zauberberg* was not at all foreign to music or to certain musical pieces.²⁴

²¹ Arnold Schönberg, *Stil und Gedanke, Aufsätze zur Musik*, Frankfurt, 1976, p. 33 (“Ich selbst betrachte die Totalität eines Stückes als den *Gedanken*: den *Gedanken* den sein Schöpfer darstellen wollte.”) (1930).

²² See, *ex negativo*, Hermann Broch who introduced a general condemnation of the *Art Nouveau* period with an obviously irritated condemnation of its architecture. “Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit”, in *Schriften zur Literatur I*, Frankfurt, 1975, pp. 285-336. Similarly in his novel *Die Schlafwandler*, Frankfurt, 1978, where he goes even further and where he rejects, along with false architecture, false existence, experienced in style and as style (see pp. 418-475).

²³ It is well known that Kandinsky and Klee developed a theory of elementary forms. The details of their theories are quite different, but the fundamental hypothesis is identical: the existence of forms and of elementary values.

²⁴ Thomas Mann himself pointed out the musical inspiration of his novel: *Einführung in den Zauberberg*. In *Gesammelte Werke*, Stuttgart, 1974; vol. XI, pp. 602-617.

The poetic art, as art of *techne*, of matter, of an instrument in the second degree, could be understood in light of Andy Warhol's quip, "I would like to be a machine", in complete agreement with Diderot's Raphael-machine, all the more revealing for apparently being unconscious. The work of art is conceived as a determined or random step in the constellation of "loaded dice", that is, a technical rule for the functioning of a procedure;²⁵ the combinative principle takes the place of the stylistic principle. Art, representative of this model, is the object half-way between the artistic and the extra-artistic because of the ambiguous nature of its creation. The poetics of the object is obviously reductionist; an object, such as Duchamp's "Bottle Rack", an arrangement in the permutation of a sequence of figures and of colors as in Max Bill,²⁶ a sequence of notes as created by repetitive music, or of characters and words as created by letrist poetry, or *in extremis* a gadget, is a sign—an illusory sign—of its real function, of its own *techne* and nothing more.

Nearly one hundred years after Diderot's lucid and prophetic *Salon*, Baudelaire, horrified and revolted, had a foreboding sense of a mortal threat in his 1859 *Salon*: the decline of art, because he had seen the death of "the imagination" in the invention of photography. His judgment of the new art was certainly not correct, but the tendency he thought he saw arising in photography proved to be accurate. Baudelaire's time and the periods that immediately followed—the Third Republic and *Art Nouveau*—were the last to have conceived of objects with an artistic teleology; their aura, their *Stimmung* was so penetrating that Walter Benjamin would still feel it. The modern conception of objects, in the sense that a city is also an object, is the opposite of this style

²⁵ It is quite characteristic that one of the latest attempts at a rehabilitation of the concept of style, proposed by George Kubler, proceeds by means of a radical reductionism. Kubler defines style on the basis of archaeological resources. In his conception style is a serial rule of spatial visualization; only one more step is needed to define style as a pure serial instruction. See George Kubler, *The Shape... op. cit.*, and also, "Towards a Reductive Theory of Visual Style", in Berel Lang (ed.), *The Concept of Style*, Pennsylvania 1979, pp. 119-129.

²⁶ The fact that Max Bill wrote the very favorable preface to the new edition of Kandinsky's works is certainly significant for the problem and basis common to the two solutions. See Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige*, pp. 5-16.

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and of this stylization. This new concept aims at removing style from objects; the negation of style is their only style. What according to Lyotard is called “the post-modern condition”, and what Baudrillard called “the cultural system of signs”²⁷ is defined from our point of view as the end of historic style. However, this phenomenon of historic style, on the cusp of its disappearance, confirmed the universal horizon of its existence.

MODERN STYLE: END OR ORIGIN

Once again let us note a text that is forgotten but of major importance. In the middle of the period when the modern style was being depreciated, Breton and Dali reasserted its value as the beginning of a new era and the first arbitrary creation of an artistic universe. “Despite the particularly violent reaction it unleashed, it should indeed not be forgotten that the architectural and sculptural art of 1900, called the modern style, disrupted from top to bottom the prevalent idea of human construction in space, which it expressed with a unique, sudden and unforeseen intensity, the ‘desire for ideal things’ that until that time seemed to escape its realm, at least in the civilized world. As Salvador Dali stated so passionately for the first time in 1930, ‘No collective effort has appeared to create a dream world as pure and as disturbing as these modern style buildings, which by themselves, on the fringes of architecture, represent veritable realizations of solidified desires, where a more violent and cruel automatism sadly betrays hatred of reality and the need for refuge in an ideal world, just like what occurs in a childhood neurosis’.”²⁸

The same view of the phenomenon, herald of the great turning point about to occur, was taken up anew in the Sixties. In the enthusiasm, and sometimes in the veritable exaltation, scien-

²⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne*, Paris, 1979; Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets*, Paris, 1968, p. 38.

²⁸ André Breton, “Situation surréaliste de l’objet”, lecture delivered 29 March 1935 in Prague; in “André Breton: Position politique du surréalisme”, *La Bibliothèque Volante* No. 2, May 1971, pp. 24-25.

tific or not, of the rediscovery of *Art Nouveau*, in the spectacular re-evaluation that transformed the cumbersome vestige it had become into the equal of “Flamboyant Gothic”,²⁹ interest shifted to exploration of the fruitful aspects of this *fin-de-siècle*. The result was, and has remained, quite important. The *fin-de-siècle* was the origin, the beginning of different modern trends, at the time still vague and primitive, but sufficiently distinct in general to be set off from the conditions and movements of preceding styles and to indicate a turning point toward modernity.³⁰

THE SELF-REFERENTIAL WORK: A CREATION OF “NON-STYLE”

Our intention has not been to minimize the importance of this rediscovery, especially not in light of its somewhat less than universal dimensions. For several years *Art Nouveau* characterized fashion from New York to Budapest, from science to crafts. On the other hand, we have attempted to show the other side of this continuity, namely the breaking off that began with the genesis of the modern era, the end of style, and even somewhat “*la fin du globe*”, the end of a world in the *fin-de-siècle*.

If its fanciful devices can be believed, *fin-de-siècle* style did in fact formulate and fundamentally re-examine the principal questions raised at the turning point between the old and the new eras. But the response of modern art consisted precisely in surpassing and suppressing these questions. In each of its two representative forms, the work of art rejects every mission that would be transcendent to it; the work of art is self-referential, functional, homogeneous, anti-ornamental. It is the thetic opposite of an *Art Nouveau* work and, from a more general perspective, the suppression of the tradition of historic style.

²⁹ Aragon, “L’Art Nouveau d’où je suis”, in Roger H. Guerrand, *L’art nouveau en Europe*, Paris, 1965, p. XIX.

³⁰ Werner Hofmann has proven with extraordinary pertinence the usefulness and the correctness of this concept. See his many theoretical and historical works on the period, including the volume *Gegenstimme*, Frankfurt, 1979, pp. 9-113, a sort of sovereign and already distant adieu to a scientific theme that had marked him for 25 years.

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In a spirit identical to this hypothesis, the question discussed in the years of popularity common to *fin-de-siècle* style and the historic style in general, namely, “Does the twentieth century have a style of its own?”, seems very badly put. In the sense of historic style, the twentieth century has no style; its works of art and its arts are no longer conceived as works of art and as arts in a style. One question effectively summarizes this radical turn of events, the question that closes a recent volume devoted entirely to style: “Why style rather than non-style?”.³¹

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³¹ It is with this question that Lang concludes his own contribution, the last in the volume that he also edited. See Berel Lang, *The Concept...*, *op. cit.*, p. 238.